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ABSTRACT

A freshman writing director's first year of teaching was worse than anything she had experienced as a graduate student, although she was trying to be exactly the same kind of teacher she had been as a graduate teaching assistant. Her realization was that she needed to know more about the abilities of her students and adjust her standards or expectations. What had made for a successful graduate student (never bothering with socializing or departmental politics) made for a poorly prepared administrator. College faculty must answer to their students. It is also essential for faculty to assess the values and philosophy underpinning the department, since many major university English departments hold very strong philosophical positions which graduate students and faculty must embrace. The isolationist perspective of graduate school life conflicts with the nature of professional life, where faculty work in committees. Graduate students entering professional life should: (1) keep a low profile the first year; (2) quietly study the school and the department; (3) learn to say no; (4) act in good faith; and (5) ask colleagues for help and advice. (RS)

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ED 370 126

Joan S. Latchaw

What they don't tell you in graduate school

This essay was inspired by my own experience as a first time faculty member and by a session at the 1992 MLA titled, "Doctoral Programs in English for the 1990s and Beyond." I have recently completed an article on graduate education which I hope to publish. Just as the Greeks have their secrets and initiatory rites, we academicians (both neophytes and veterans) acknowledge--some with somberness, others with satire or cynicism--the trauma of that first year or two.

My recent (all too vivid experience) has motivated me to alert all of you graduate students: on what to expect in that first job, how to cope with the demands and stress, and how to tailor your knowledge and experience to the new situation. I am focusing on the transition from the teaching university to the small college, because that is where most of the jobs are.

Although my comments are directed primarily to the graduate student, there are significant ways the chair, department, and administration can help with this difficult transition. Last year's MLA panels' suggestions for facilitating a spirit of negotiation, good faith, and support, are invaluable. I will draw on their reflections in addition to my own experience.

After completing my dissertation, everyone said (from my mother to my advisor to my dissertation buddy) that nothing would ever be as bad as that year. They were wrong. The first year of teaching was not just "as bad." It was worse! Worse than anything I'd experienced in academia.

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I was hired as Director of Freshman Writing at a small southern liberal arts school right after graduating from a big northern research university. I was scheduled to teach 3 Basic Writing courses, 1 101 course, serve on various committees, oversee part time faculty, collaborate with the Foundations program, hold composition seminars, and define my job, which was newly created. (I probably left out something.) During the campus interview, I was assured that, with my record of scholarship and teaching, I would have no problem keeping up with the pace.

After 2 months on the job, I suddenly realized I had lost weight; who had time to cook? Or even eat, for that matter?

Reflecting on all this a year later, somewhat saner, wiser, and heavier, I am assessing the situation, the pitfalls, and trying to articulate what went wrong and why. In this article, I will outline some of the problems, and suggest some solutions for both the adjusting faculty member and the administration.

Problem #1. I was trying to be exactly the same kind of teacher I was at the university. I assigned a paper or revision every week-10 days, commented and returned them promptly, and had the same expectations I always did.

Result: I worked 13 hours a day, every day, just to keep up with the paper load and my other duties. The theory underlying my pedagogy--that each assignment builds on the next with improvements--was not working. Because my students were not progressing as I expected, I assigned even more revisions. I began to panic, waking up in a cold sweat, when my 101 students still couldn't write a focused paper 3 1/2 weeks before finals.

When I came to my new job, I had a mistaken notion that the students were better than those of my teaching university. My campus interview consisted of teaching a 102 class (second semester English); the students seemed sharp and knowledgeable. Therefore, it did not occur to me to assess the body of students more closely. This was a particularly significant error since I was hired as Director of Freshman Writing.

Solution: **First**, it is essential to assess your students. What kind of background can you assume? Are your students readers? Do they have fundamental knowledge in your specialty or must it be taught?

One way to go about this process *before* your arrival is to ask teachers for sample papers at the beginning, middle and end of the term and compare them to yours. You might also ask to see tests and assignments and a range of grades (perhaps more appropriate for literature classes). Be sure also that you look at departmental goals and requirements for each course you teach. Test those against the sample papers, scores, and other materials.

Second, you may have to adjust your standards or expectations. After struggling my first term with both Basic Writing and English 101, a former graduate student suggested that I think of the 101 as a Basic Course and the Basic as the first level Basic course (Basic Reading and Writing) at my old school. While the analogy was not 100% valid, it forced me to question my assumptions about ***courses***, rather than considering individual ***students*** in those courses.

This is not to say that a teacher should give up her principles. You may have to investigate other methods. Discuss theory and practice with other teachers. One of my colleagues (also a new teacher) was not struggling as much as I was with paper load. She was schooled in collaboration and suggested that I teach students to workshop their papers. That way, the teacher only sees the final draft. At the time, I saw the workshop model as a liferaft. And I have come to understand its many benefits (student centredness, self-reflection).

Problem #2. What made me a highly successful graduate student made me a poorly prepared administrator. As a graduate student, I never bothered much about politics of the department or the university, and wasted little time socializing in other people's offices. I finished the Ph.D. in good time and wrote the dissertation in 9 months. I obeyed my dissertation director's dictims: stay in front of the computer all day; you can stop to eat and go to the bathroom. I bought and used as a bible, How to Complete and Survive Your Dissertation (which I highly recommend). I met weekly with a dissertation buddy and met each deadline agreed upon with my advisor. I retreated into the 3rd floor study and became a hermit. In my "spare time," I applied for jobs. I finished the dissertation and landed a job in a recession year.

Result: I knew little about compromising, negotiating, or collaborating with my colleagues. I didn't know when to speak out and when to quietly observe. So I relied on my friendly and outgoing personality. Sometimes this worked and other times it backfired. I got into trouble. On one particularly embarrassing and

painful occasion, I was called in by my chairman and another faculty member for interfering with a project; my good intentions were considered a breech. While I recognized my mistake and was apologetic, I was also mortified. Later that day, there was a committee meeting with the complaining faculty member. In a Walter Mitty fashion, I imagined the entire committee voting to expel me from its offices. The offended faculty member would burn pins into my eyes. Much to my amazement, nothing happened, and everyone from the dean to the complainant, was friendly and easygoing. Nevertheless, I didn't dare look anyone in the eye. Now I am learning to be more tactful and close-mouthed. It has worked. The offended professor recently asked me to participate in a panel discussion on pedagogy in higher education.

On the other hand, I tread too lightly in evaluating adjunct faculty (at least for some members of my department). Because I didn't want to appear threatening, I did not demand immediate changes. Instead, I envisioned the first year as a period of assessment. I collected information, observed classes and tried to determine why there were inconsistencies among teachers.

In the beginning of my next year, certain faculty formed an ad hoc committee in my absence (I had to leave a meeting early) to propose a plan for dealing with the adjuncts. I was astonished and felt like a victim of one of those academic coups so famous in large political universities. After some manipulations, I managed to finagle myself as chair of what became a standing committee. In this case, I should have been more aggressive.

Solution: Try to get the political lay of the land. Find out how your institution and department work, what standards and models they value, what faculty goals and frustrations are, and how changes are made. Then determine where you stand in relation to this information, and what your best prospects are for integrating your principles with the school's.

Problem #3. In graduate school, you are responsible to the director of graduate studies, director of the writing program, etc. On the job you must **also** answer to your students. Evaluations and opinions count. While the consequences may not be as serious in a large institution, they often take on mammoth proportions at a smaller one. And the circumstances of student griping can be devastating and distracting.

Result: My second term, when I decided to use computers in the writing classroom, a number of students descended (unbeknownst to me) on the **chairman**, yes the chairman, complaining how unfair this was. Since there was a clear precedent in my department on the use of computers, I was, needless to say, astonished to be questioned and challenged by the chair. I dreaded an imminant coup right around the corner. I also felt that I could never tolerate living in an academic environment where my pedagogy was questioned. This situation caused me great consternation (I have since gone through a grade appeal and some other gut-wrenching situations.)

I thought I might be fired. I saw myself wandering the hills of Appalachia begging for a job. I dreampt about students burning me at the stake. I detested the bellyaching and the immaturity of the

masses here. I longed once more for the anonymity of the big university where I could get lost in the crowd.

Solution: Get a friend. Preferably outside your department. I have been very fortunate to have as a very close friend, the chair of another department, who incidentally, has been at my institution a healthy number of years. He knows the personalities. He knows the climate of the school. He knows the changes, the quirks, the inner mechanisms and the inner sanctums. My friend, I came to find out, had a standing joke with the dean because he had the largest number of appeals of anyone on campus.

However, I am often a total blank when it comes to analysis--of student appeals, or colleagues' intentions, or my chair's evaluation of me. My friend tells me what things mean. He interprets intentions, behavior, personalities, situations. He is a balm to my spirit, a comic muse, warding off anxiety attacks and panic states. Get one friend you can trust.

Problem #4. Major university English departments commonly hold very strong philosophical positions which you must, as a graduate student, embrace. I know of a Writing Director who told a teacher that if she couldn't accept the method, she should leave. One department might be steeped in multiculturalism, another in feminist studies, or the Studio Method of composition (collaboration) or computers in the writing classroom, etc. By the time a student graduates, these departmental habits of mind can be firmly ingrained.

You will undoubtedly go to either a large institution with a different philosophy or a small one with no particular philosophy.

The smaller school is likely to be highly traditional, admittedly commited to liberal education, or humanism. Your orientation may be considered radical by comparison. You have to live in this new environment.

Solution: It is essential to assess your department, its values and the philosophy underpinning particular coursework. For instance, don't assume that American Lit is taught with the same emphasis or philosophy as your old school. Multi-cultural influences, widely accepted at universities, are slow to reach a broader range of schools. The same may be true of feminist perspectives, Marxist, etc. In my case, freshman comp has traditionally been taught via rhetorical modes. I have never approached writing this way. I have struggled with ways to negotiate my values with the department's. One of my solutions is to find how my assignments are, in fact, comparison/contrast, although I don't name them as such. Another strategy which is possible for me, as Director of Freshman Writing, is departmental evaluation. I have set up an Ad Hoc committee to re-evaluate our freshman writing program in light of current comp theory and what other teachers are actually doing.

Problem #5. The nature of graduate school encourages a competitive, isolationist environment. Students compete for grades, fellowships, teaching assistantships, and grants. Except for occasional study groups or a rare group project, the coursework and dissertation are accomplished in isolation. However, this isolationist perspective conflicts with the nature of professional life, where faculty work in committees. Fighting solo battles will get you nowhere in academia.

Result: I have already discussed how this attitude effects the ability to negotiate. On a more personal level, some students (and this is frightening), report that their personalities are permanently altered post dissertation. To some degree I fit this pattern. Being holed up in my 3rd floor study for 9 months has made me something of a hermit and more of a workaholic. I still haven't developed much of a social network, which remains a serious gap in my life, perhaps even adding to my recent medical problems with allergies and stress.

Solution: Follow the advice of my new chair, whose words of wisdom I am finally able to hear: you don't have to do everything yourself. Neither do you have to know everything: "Work in committee. Use others' expertise." The Houses of Pain project with my Basic Writers is a perfect example. My class, responding to a rape on campus, asked if they could research and write about rape, abuse, and addictions instead of completing the planned assignments. I accepted the challenge. However, when the students suggested gathering their work (stories, statistics, poems, art) into a book, I became nervous. What did I know about interviewing, or editing, or layout? I had never edited a book or magazine, done a layout, interviewed experts. Other interested faculty and staff members motivated our group, sent us newspaper articles, advised us on how to follow leads and collect artwork from students, and helped with numerous other details. The result was that we all became experts. Organizations on campus asked us to come and speak about our project, the media featured us on local TV, and we hosted a two day symposium on rape and abuse.

I am adopting this collaborative model in everything I do--as an administrator (working in committee), as a teacher (with collaborative groups), and as a researcher (working with other experts). It's not only a way to survive, but gain expertise. As my chair re-iterates, "When we combine everyone's ideas on a project, the final results are sounder, more powerful, well argued, and convincing. In addition when you work in committee, you have more people in your court, which is a decided political advantage. Although I have learned this lesson, another problem has resulted. I am on too many committees.

In this paper, I have isolated 5 problems which I think represent the most serious obstacles graduate students must face when entering professional life. As a way to close off this discussion, I will offer a list of rules which I call

LATCHAW'S TOOL KIT FOR SURVIVAL

1. Keep a low profile the first year. Every professor and teacher I spoke to hammered this one home. I didn't listen. It got me into trouble on occasion. I overextended myself. I didn't get the lay of the land. On the other hand, in my 3rd year, most people know who I am, respect me, and ask for my help and advice on many issues of writing. Keeping a low profile, however, helps you adust better to the job and keep your sanity.

2. Learn quietly about your school and your department. Observe and listen. Be wary of trusting anyone100%. I do not intend this in a mean-spirited way. But what is in your best interest may oppose what is in someone else's best interest. Keep it to yourself

until you know who you should confide in. Although everyone must find allies, getting the political lay of the land means assessing your colleagues, departments, and administration somewhat objectively.

3. Learn to say no. Decide what you can do comfortably without getting overly stressed or sick. I am not entirely successful here because I am interested in too many things. Study your job description and be sure you fulfill it. Some schools give release time for the first year. Mine didn't. I was teaching 4 comp courses my first term (3 of them Basic Writing). The next term I told my chair I would never teach 4 comp courses again. He gave me his lit class. In short, learn to negotiate.

4. Act in good faith. Demonstrate that you are a valuable addition to your school and department. And that you want to be there. I have built good relations with many faculty because I show interest in their teaching, research, and philosophies. I offer my services as Director of Writing in any way I can to help them in their causes and projects. For this reason, I am successful in starting a WAC program. Grass roots interest works better than administrative dictums.

5. Ask colleagues for help and advice. Trust their expertise. At first this may seem uncomfortable. In grad school we are expected to master knowledge, prove ourselves on exams and dissertation defenses. However, there's no way we can be knowledgeable in many other disciplines. Your colleagues, at least in my school, may be flattered by your interest and willing to collaborate in the future. One nursing faculty asked me to co-author a workbook on critical thinking last year, after I was consulted by

the nursing dept. Building good will is an invaluable benefit as a professional.

6. Follow all the other rules and good luck!